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— *Event Transcript* —

**Jordan:
Why Real Reform Can't Wait**

**Thursday, July 15, 2021
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Arwa Shobaki [1:07]

Hi and welcome. I'm Arwa Shobaki, Managing Director for the Project on Middle East Democracy, and I'd like to thank you all for joining our panel today to discuss Jordan.

On Monday, Jordan's King Abdullah II will meet with President [Joseph R.] Biden at the White House. Typically such a visit wouldn't attract much attention. But this first meeting between the two leaders comes at a moment of escalating repression, political instability, and economic decline in the Kingdom. In April, many of us were shocked to hear the news of arrests linked to an alleged coup in Jordan and Prince Hamzah bin Hussein's subsequent and continued house arrest. While the facts behind the April arrest and closed door trial and convictions remain unknown, in truth, problems have been mounting since at least 2011. And Jordanians have consistently been calling for an end to rampant corruption, for job creation, and for a more empowered, representative government.

Yet instead of leading any meaningful reform, King Abdullah has cycled through seven prime ministers, three rounds of parliamentary elections, and empty reform initiatives that have changed nothing for the common Jordanian. The COVID-19 pandemic has also taken a heavy toll on Jordan's economy and population, with 750,000 confirmed cases and at least 10,000 dead out of a population of only 10 million. Nearly 40 percent of Jordanians live in poverty and unemployment is at a record 25 percent.

As we all know, King Abdullah has great support here in Washington. Jordan is now the second-largest recipient of U.S. bilateral aid in the world after Israel, receiving more than \$1.5 billion annually, and, since 2015, more than \$1 billion in additional military aid from the Defense

Department. This aid comes with no real reform strings attached. Such a deep and longstanding financial investment ought to provide the United States with leverage to incentivize real reform in Jordan before further instability and decline ensue. But so far, the Biden administration has not shown any interest in pressing the king to change course.

I'm here today with three exceptional panelists to explore Jordan's domestic political issues and discuss what steps the Biden administration and Congress may be able to take to help address these issues. I'd like to first welcome Bessma Momani, joining us from Canada, where she's a professor of political science at the University of Waterloo and a leading expert on the Middle East. Also joining us today is Curtis Ryan, professor of political science at Appalachian State University and a leading Jordan expert here in the U.S. And finally, Sean Yom, associate professor of political science at Temple University and a specialist on Arab monarchies, authoritarian politics, and their implications for U.S. foreign policy. Thank you all for joining us today and welcome.

We'll start today's discussion with a question for each of you on Jordan's domestic situation and then shift our focus to U.S. policy toward Jordan. We'll ask audience questions next, so please, if you're watching and listening, submit a question if you have one through the Q&A button on Zoom, or email us at communications@pomed.org.

Bessma, I'd like to start with you and ask you to give us your thoughts on the alleged coup plot and recently concluded closed-door trial of Jordan's former finance minister and chief of the Royal Court, Bassem Awadallah, and royal family member Sharif bin Zaid. On Monday, the State Security Court handed them each 15-year sentences for sedition and incitement. What do you make of the trial and the verdict? And what about Prince Hamzah and his continued extra-judicial house arrest? Has this weakened or strengthened him in the eyes of the Jordanian public? And how much does that matter? Please go ahead.

Bessma Momani [5:02]

Thanks, Arwa. And thanks to POMED for the invitation. And I'm humbled to be actually with real Jordanian experts, Curtis and Sean, who have written [far] more on this than I have. So to your question, the whole plot has been—or the alleged coup plot—has been really quite mysterious and clouded by a lot of uncertainties, leaks that are coming out here and there. I think rumors certainly have been circulating throughout, as you said, it's a very small country and a small population.

I would say generally, there's not a lot of sympathy for Awadallah. I mean, certainly, he has those folks who do see him as indeed a reformer. But he came with so much economic pain during his tenure that generally speaking, sadly, his name is associated with corruption and a

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great deal of mismanagement that happened in the country. And so I think there's an overall satisfaction, right, it's sort of seeing a big man in the country being taken down. So there's a bit of a celebration, if you will, of his arrest.

I think the other royal [Sharif bin Zaid] was a really unknown commodity, generally. He wasn't really popular or well known, so I think it's a bit interesting, too, to see the same kind of sentencing given to both: 15 years of hard labor. Even just saying hard labor, again, you can just see the optics of it, it really is in the interest of the little guy, if you will. So I think there is a lot of support for this.

As to the accusations and the whole plot: it doesn't add up, in my humble view. It seems really weird in many ways. The base of Awadallah does not match the base of Hamzah, which is to me the most clear disconnect with all of this. It doesn't make sense. Even just being as imaginative as one can be, to see Awadallah in the company of Hamzah just doesn't make sense. Again, Hamzah is seen as a person who understands the tribes, the Transjordanians, quite literally sits down with them on the floor, has a way of mannerism and speaking that is very comfortable to the tribes, whereas Awadallah is their cosmopolitan banker and seen in the kind of Davos circles. So they just don't match. And so trying to put this plot together has been always very odd.

But generally speaking, there are core believers in this plot. Certainly Jordanian intelligence believes it, and people in the national security sector [do]. And I suspect that they are sharing intelligence with the Americans to convince them. So I can't really—as a person who doesn't have access to that kind of information—I can't really say whether or not it's a valid accusation, but I would say as an outsider, it just doesn't add up, and then many Jordanians on the ground are still perplexed. They don't really buy it. And so the government either has to really give the Jordanian public enough of a smoking gun to convince them, which they haven't, or just assume that—just leave it as is, which is what I think they're trying to do.

Now of course Hamzah is under house arrest. We haven't heard from him. We saw a brief picture of him with his brother praying over their father's grave. But generally speaking, we haven't really seen a lot from Hamzah, obviously, except those two leaked videos. And from those two videos, he's gotten a lot of popularity. People see him as, again, a person who understands what the little guy is feeling—and the socio-economic challenges of the average Jordanian [are] pretty immense. And it seems weird to have a royal having that populist role and sympathy with the average person, but I think he did it so eloquently that his popularity likely increased. And I think most people still don't buy the so-called sedition plot. So he's escaped this not completely unscathed—because those who certainly believed it do feel that something has to be done about Hamzah as a potential

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internal threat. But I'd say overall, quietly, Jordanians are saying that they don't believe Hamzah is a part of this [alleged plot].

Arwa Shobaki [9:14]

Great, thank you.

Sean, I'd like to switch to you and ask you: In the widely publicized video released by Prince Hamzah's lawyer in April amid unclear allegations against the prince for conspiring to undermine the government, Prince Hamzah called out the incompetence, corruption, and mismanagement by the governing structure, as well as the loss of faith Jordanians have in their institutions and the fear many have of arrest and harassment should they express their frustrations. This and the later leaked audio recording that Bessma just referenced of the confrontation between the Prince and the Chief of the General Staff resonated deeply with many Jordanians. Can you unpack this for us a little bit? And why do these criticisms resonate among Jordanians? And how have these issues become worse in recent years?

Sean Yom [10:04]

Yes, that's a great question. And like Bessma, I want to thank POMED for inviting me to speak here today. And also it's always a pleasure to speak on any panel with Curt and obviously with Bessma as well.

I think this question is important because it emphasizes the meaningful intersection between the so-called "Hamzah affair" and the broader terrain of social discontent that we've seen roiling Jordan for much of the past two decades under King Abdullah.

I would say that the Western media, for better or for worse, gave the palace intrigues and the political maneuverings about the Hamzah incident (and the role of Bessam Awadallah, of other high-ranking figures, former officials, other elites who were connected to the whole entourage [whom] they initially arrested or detained)—the attention given to that affair is predictable, because the Western media likes to focus on pretty high-level political issues that seem to implicate the stability of an ally like Jordan.

But the intersection with social discontent was apparent precisely because, as you mentioned, Hamzah was particularly well known among not just certain Transjordanian communities and tribes and tribal voices, but because he among all the royals that we know of, over the past few years, at least (because there have been instances in the past), has most explicitly called out issues of corruption and mismanagement and incompetence and abuses of power by the Jordanian state.

And the reason that resonates for many Jordanians—and not just Jordanians of particular tribal origin, but many young Jordanians in particular—is that we know that the frequency of popular grievance from all quarters across Jordanian society has risen remarkably, even since the Arab Spring. And it's not always shown by the level of public mobilization. News headlines tend to center in with a laser focus on protests and other episodes of loud, visible contentiousness. But

we have good public survey evidence that highlights that even when there are no protests happening, a good majority of society really does think that their country is being chronically mismanaged.

So, as evidence, I can just recite a few numbers from the latest wave of the Arab Barometer, the pan-regional survey in the Arab world undertaken by a consortium of American universities and institutions. In its most recent pre-COVID results from 2018 and 2019, we found out the following pretty sobering statistics about the beliefs and attitudes of Jordanians: In 2018 and 2019, the Arab Barometer found [that] only 38 percent of Jordanians trust the government, which is down from 66 percent in 2011. Only about 50 percent of Jordanians believe [that] the right to express free opinions is modestly or strongly guaranteed, which is down from 71 percent in 2011. We know as well [that] most Jordanian journalists practice some form of self-censorship to avoid punishment. Nearly 77 percent of Jordanians today, or at least in 2018 and 2019, see the economic situation as bad or very bad. And that's far higher than the 56 percent who answered the same in 2011. Eighty-six percent believe the government was failing to create enough job opportunities, and a whopping 89 percent believe that corruption was widespread, which is far higher than the 66 percent we saw in 2011.

So keep in mind, this is all pre-COVID. So if we've discovered anything from the COVID pandemic, it's that if there were pre-existing social or economic problems in a country before a pandemic paralyzed everything, the pandemic doesn't make those better. It tends to aggravate and make those things worse.

So we know, for instance, that right now youth unemployment in Jordan, which was at about 37 to 38 percent in 2019, is now estimated at about 50 percent. So essentially, if you're between the ages of 16 and 28 and you are seeking a job in Jordan, you're probably—one out of two of you are not going to get a job. So put this in global perspective. Jordan is now one of the three worst countries in the world for getting a job if you happen to be between the ages of 16 and 28. There are only two other countries with higher youth unemployment rates: Libya and South Africa.

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So I know that these are a lot of data. And these are a lot of attitudes and views to absorb at once. And I don't mean to connote that Jordanians are united in all their grievances. Jordanians are diverse: they have different identities, they have different ideologies, they don't organize in the same way; not all protest when they're unhappy. And they don't all have the same demands made upon the government. But if you look at results like these from credible public surveys, it's difficult to walk away with anything but the conclusion that if nothing else, a majority of Jordanians think that there are some severe social, economic, and political shortcomings regarding how their country's being managed and governed. That should be indisputable.

And they don't always focus on the same issues, but certain ones keep on coming up when you talk to activists, when you listen to protests, when you read social media. Issues of corruption, for instance, issues of abuses of power, issues of the wrong people having decision-making authority and not being able to make the right kinds of decisions, which are attuned to the social and economic needs of the lower-income communities and the middle classes that make up the vast majority of society.

And so if we take these common opinions from what we might call it the “street” of Jordan, then we get that powerful intersection between the Hamzah affair and the terrain of social discontent and grievance. That when Hamzah, a member of the royal family, is explicitly invoking the same issues that we know empirically most Jordanians have uttered, talked about, protested against, or invoked in some form of private or public discussion—that matters. That's what makes this agenda for potential change and reform so important. That's what makes it also so urgent, given the degree of dissatisfaction that we've proven to exist among so much of society.

Arwa Shobaki [17:08]

Thank you. That's a perfect segue for my next question for Curtis. As someone [who] has closely studied Jordan and Jordanian political movements, what changes have you seen on the ground in Jordan the past two years in terms of grassroots popular movements and demands? Electoral laws, gerrymandering, and carefully designed parliaments have played an important role in dividing Jordanian society in the past. For example, urban versus rural, East Banker versus West Banker, etc. Can Jordanians overcome these societal divisions and unify around a common cause for reform? And if so, what specific type of reforms would be most likely to serve as unifying in this way?

Curtis Ryan [17:51]

Good questions. And also, I want to thank POMED for having me. It's great to be on here with you, Arwa, and always great to see you, Bessma and Sean. So I'm going to follow up on their comments, especially along the lines of what's different here.

In the last 10 years, especially, we've just seen so much change. 2011 was really quite exciting for a lot of people. Protest is certainly not new to Jordanian politics and demonstrations are not new to Jordanian politics, but one of the things that struck me as new and different was relatively new actors entering the public stage in Jordanian public life. So we had sort of traditional versions of opposition showing up: the political parties, which are not significantly strong in Jordan, but nonetheless are traditionally part—or at least many of them—are traditionally part of opposition left wing parties, pan-Arab nationalist parties, things like that. And certainly the Islamist movement in its various forms were active at various times.

But the unique part to me was the Hirak phenomenon, [the] emergence of the popular movements that developed. And I think we're already, just a few years later—already this is getting muddied—where people are thinking of that [Hirak movement] as a couple different things, mainly because I think it really was originally a couple different things. There was the Hirak movement in the sense of any form of popular movement: the labor movements that were

organizing down in Aqaba in the south, to the attempt to get a teachers' union underway, or—the way it was used more specifically, especially in 2011-12, etc.— of *youth* popular movements. And that was the unique part, where it seemed like there was literally no corner of Jordan that didn't have its own popular youth movement pop up, starting with Dhiban and then moving on to other parts of the country.

These are all, in various degrees, still part of Jordanian politics. It's just that we're not in the days of the Arab Spring anymore. We've seen lots of changes, more restrictions on protests and certainly on freedom of speech and so on. We've seen also shifts in strategy on the ground. And then of course, the pandemic hits, so that changed a lot of things. So I think what is interesting is when these doors start opening up again, where do things go? When the pandemic starts to recede to the extent that it can, and so on, where do we go from here?

I want to echo something that Sean just mentioned about: what are people actually talking about? The thing that really stood out to me about the protests and demands for reform was that whatever the motivating factor was—whether it was pro-democracy movements or tax revolt or anger about price increases or subsidies being withdrawn—any protests in the last 10 years, say, they are coming from different directions. Sometimes it's politically motivated, sometimes it seems to be economically motivated.

And my suggestion would be: the mistake is when people leave it at that and see any of these as uncausal, because it's hard for me to find a Jordanian protest or social movement or activist movement that doesn't fairly quickly branch out. If it started economically, it gets to politics almost immediately. If it started politically, they're bringing in the economics almost immediately. And every single one of them, at one point or another, will talk about corruption. It's the single most common complaint in Jordanian public life, and it has been for a really long time, which is why—and I'm going to echo my colleague Bessma here as well—that's why the reaction to Awadallah went as it is, and to his conviction. There was considerable skepticism, as she correctly pointed out, and also disappointment. There are a lot of people who were not sympathetic to him but thought he should be tried for completely different reasons, [for] what they would think of as economic issues.

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And because of that, to bring it around to the other thrust of your question, which is social aspects and reform, I think that's why the answer, therefore can't be—whatever the reforms turn out to be, especially with this new reform committee being unveiled, and it's going to come up by the beginning of October with a whole slew of reforms—it can't be more neoliberalism for everybody. You can't go back down the road of exactly what the mess was in the first place and what almost everybody agrees, at least to varying degrees, has been part of the problem.

We've had fissures, we've had fault lines along east and west Jordanian lines, and along social class lines, and left and right, and religious and secular, and different regions of the country, and so on. But it's already a small country, so to have it divided into smaller and smaller bits, it seems to me has been part of the problem. And part of that is just foreign stereotyping of the country. There are people who look at Jordan and see it as this entirely tribally based society and others who think it's an entirely basically de facto Palestinian society. And both of those strike me as sort of inane, silly caricatures of a little tiny sliver of Jordan, which is a much more complex society than that.

And so if there are reforms that people could actually rally around, they would have to include both the economic and political. They would have to include the anti-corruption message. If you had one word to use, I think the word would be “inclusion.” A lot of Jordanians feel, economically, increasingly left behind, so just political reform is not going to address that. Or just dealing with more favorable subsidy policies and so on is not going to deal with the issue of people being worried that civil society is eroding and freedom of speech is going away.

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Along the list of reforms, I expect the emphasis to be where it usually is, which is on elections and electoral laws and parties and parliament, which is not in and of itself terrible. It's just that that can't be the end. Because most people don't support parliament, they don't believe it's effective. It's not particularly powerful. Most [Jordanians] don't join political parties and don't think they're effective anyway. I mean, most people in parliament aren't even in political parties.

So the emphasis, to me, has to be on the social safety net, on the possibilities for the youth of Jordan, on job creation—and not just in Amman, and certainly not just in west Amman—and dealing with things like the cost of living and the cost of housing, which everyone who has been to Amman or lives in Amman knows is comparable to well-to-do Gulf states. Which is ridiculous, actually, that wealthy oil-producing countries are at the same level of expense as Jordan's capital.

So I think it comes around to reachieving basic rights for political activity and freedom of speech and not worrying about what you post on Facebook and whether it's going to come back and haunt you, or on Twitter, or your right to organize.

And last point I would make about this is if there is going to be a big emphasis on political parties in the new reform initiatives, which seems likely, that's a big uphill battle for many reasons—not just institutionally, but [because] people have so little faith in political parties. In their experience [they] have found that if [they] join a political party or try to form a political party, [they] seem to be putting [themselves] on the radar of intelligence and security services who are not cool with this idea. So the various engines of the government have to be on the same page:

If you're opening the door for all this, then don't have another branch that's closing the door simultaneously.

Arwa Shobaka [25:25]

Excellent. I don't know if, Bessma or Sean, you have anything to add to that before we shift gears and focus a little bit more on U.S. policy?

Bessma Momani [25:35]

I'd like to jump in. I couldn't agree more with Curtis. That was the perfect masterclass on the challenges that Jordan's facing. And it goes to the point that there's no shortage of neoliberalism in the country. In many ways, [Jordan] has been under IMF conditionality for more than a decade. Every experimentation in the Middle East of how to make this country more pro-private sector has been tried in Jordan. I think the key thing—going back to this feeling or perception of corruption, which is what we're often measuring—is that there is no shortage of wealth in this country. You just need to go there to see that it's dripping with wealth. Think of just Abdoun, which is the classic place where the elite live. You can't help but sense [that] in the country, there's an enormous amount of wealth. It is not trickling down.

The frustration amongst so many people—the average person, this high youth unemployment that Sean noted—these are educated young people. This is what's added to the frustration. They've done all the right things. You've told them the neoliberal model: “Go out there and get degrees.” They went out there, they got degrees, [but] your chances of getting a job with a degree is actually far lower than if you don't have a degree. That is a really sad testament to the challenges that Jordan faces in the labor market.

So my point is that people are frustrated because they've been under this program of neoliberalism for so long, and it's not working. It's absolutely not working. And Awadallah is absolutely, if you will, the quintessential person that advocated for all these reform policies, and people are hungrier today than before. Poverty is higher than before. Prices keep going up. And the wealthier seem to get wealthier, and everybody else is just suffering. So yeah, just added maybe too much to that. But thanks for the question.

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Arwa Shobaki [27:27]

Thank you. I'm going to shift gears a little bit here. And turning next to U.S. policy on Jordan since the king will be visiting with Biden on Monday. Since its creation, Jordan has played an important regional role absorbing waves of refugees while forging early and strategic partnerships with neighboring Israel and the United States. As a result, and to the detriment of many Jordanians, the ruling elite have grown richer and more corrupt, feeling protected and insulated from any real pressure for meaningful reform. Sean, you wrote in April in *Foreign Policy*, in a widely shared [article](#), that the United States remains complicit in the economic

bungling and political abuses unraveling in the country. Can you elaborate on this point, please? How is the U.S. part of the problem? And then briefly add your thoughts as to what the Biden administration and Congress should be doing to change this.

Sean Yom [28:27]

Yes, so I did write those words in that piece for *Foreign Policy*. And I did get plenty of angry responses from some readers who accused me of having never studied Jordan. There is a lot to dissect when we talk about the U.S.-Jordanian relationship. The smartest way to go about it is, when we think about bilateral relationships and international relations and within the broader geopolitical context of regions like the Middle East—we have to think about what these relationships or alliances are designed and constructed to achieve.

So whenever you hear Jordanian officials or American officials talk about the U.S.-Jordanian relationship, they use the term “alliance.” I think a better term for this relationship is a patron-client relationship. And by that I mean—that’s a little academic—but I think it’s very useful in this context because it demonstrates exactly what we’re talking about in terms of complicity to authoritarian abuse and refusals to even remotely nudge a weaker state, and a relationship, towards reformist measures.

So a patron-client relationship is essentially any sort of relationship of mutual dependency between two partners who have vastly unequal status. And so, in this case, the patron is the United States. And it’s historically, since the late 1950s, sought to bolster Jordan through dollops of diplomacy, economic aid, and military assistance. And it’s done so because Jordan has served various functions in America’s broader Middle East grand strategy. And in turn—as is well studied, and I think we can all agree on this—Jordan needs American support to survive, particularly in terms of its financial budget and its military defenses.

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But it’s worth parsing out why the U.S. has needed Jordan as a client state across generations, why it’s needed Jordan to adopt pro-Western foreign policies, why it’s needed some sort of stable routine in terms of who rules Jordan and what those rules exactly are that govern society.

So in the Cold War, Jordan was an anti-communist bulwark. In the early post-Cold War decades, it became a peace partner of Israel, as you mentioned. And, as is less talked about, it was a facilitator of American war-making in Iraq and the broader global and regional war on terror as well. And perhaps the least reported story of all now, but I think this is extremely important, is that the U.S. is in the process of massively expanding its military presence in Jordan, which is essentially becoming basically a larger version of Bahrain: a giant terrestrial aircraft carrier and a bonafide major logistical base and staging ground, or a lynchpin, for any future war-making in the region.

There are a lot of developments in terms of U.S. basing, U.S. defense agreements being signed, and U.S. technology transfers in Jordan that ha[ve] made very clear that if the U.S. were to ever wage war within essentially an 800-mile radius around Amman—which extends to the Sinai, to Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, even theoretically a war in the Gulf—it would need to mobilize and use its forces in Jordan in some capacity. So Jordan is now one of the pillars of its future vision for its reposition strategy in the Middle East.

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So this matters for a very important reason, because history provides clear guidance whenever we talk about patron-client relationships in the international system. Whenever a great power patron needs a client state to fulfill certain strategic functions—to be a bulwark against a hostile ideology, to be a loyal subordinate in the waging of war, to be a reliable pillar in terms of thinking about how to reconfigure a region according to its own geopolitical interests—that great power patron (so here, the United States) has very little incentive to promote political reforms in the client state because the fear is obvious: it fears destabilizing the client. The patron wants certainty. It wants normalcy. It wants the routine created by having the same set of elites and the same regime in place for many decades. And this is why, historically speaking, the United States has almost never applied any sort of concerted pressures regarding democracy promotion to the Hashemite Kingdom.

Now, this is not to say that the U.S. speaks in a unified voice and [that] the U.S. has never been critical of Jordan’s domestic governance. Anyone who spent time in the State Department knows that it’s not unusual to hear American diplomats complain very loudly about problems in Amman, particularly regarding corruption or authoritarian abuses of power. You hear this from people at the U.S. Embassy, you hear this from people in unguarded conversations in hallways outside the meeting room. But that pressure is never consistent. It never goes up the bureaucratic chain up at [the Department of] State, and it never becomes a talking point at the White House. And to my mind, that’s the definition of American complicity.

So when we have good data, robust data, that tell us the majority of a society in a client state that relies upon American aid and arms and support to subsist—when the majority of that society is clearly unhappy with how their society is being governed, then a powerful argument can be made that maybe long-term stability, which is in everyone’s interest, could be achieved if that great power patron—the one that’s asymmetrically more influential and powerful over that smaller state—[is] encouraging and promoting meaningful reform: economic reforms that engage in broader redistributions of wealth, political

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reforms that broaden the scope of democratic rights and personal and public freedoms, making citizens have more of a stake in how their country is governed and making them feel like their voice counts.

Now, we know why officials in Jordan—many of them, at least, not all, but many of them—have dragged their feet on making these reforms for many years. Because like all policies—backtracking on reforms, backtracking on costly policies like neoliberal economics, or reversing course and meaningfully redesigning parliament to actually have a modicum of power to hold other institutions accountable in Jordan—like all policies, these reforms create winners and losers. And in this case, the losers might be the ones who have a lot to lose because they have a preponderance of power now.

So we have good reason to understand why there are voices in Jordan that don't want to engage in these reforms. But I think the more pertinent question is: Why doesn't the U.S.? Why don't policy principals in the United States, at least, recognize that they have tools in their armory that could actually help effectuate long-term stability in Jordan—which, again, is in everyone's interests—but in doing so would need to promote reforms in the short to intermediate term?

Some of these tools are well known to those who work in the democracy promotion industry and in the broader international field of development assistance. We know that, for instance, the U.S. can potentially conditionalize economic aid on policy change, on making reforms. That's never been the case in Jordan. We know that when policy principals from the United States—like people who are fairly high up the food chain over at State or officials from the White House—when they speak to their counterparts in Jordan, we know that they have a choice of issues to bring up. The issues can be purely strategic—like what's happening in Syria, [or] let's talk about our basing agreements, [or] how are we cooperating on these strategic fronts involving intelligence or involving other issues of mutual importance that they find to be urgent now—or they can bring up the fact that most of Jordan is fairly unhappy with how their country is being governed. We have good evidence that corruption is rampant and that something has to change in a way that doesn't repeat the past, because appointing a reform committee, as Curtis mentioned, to promise reforms and not deliver is a story that's been told in Jordan before. It was told in 2005, when a 27-member reform committee was appointed by the king and it never did anything. It was told in 2011, when a 52-member royal reform committee called the National Dialogue Committee was convened and ultimately made only superficial changes. And many Jordanians fear that the same is happening now.

And the problem is not, again, just on the Jordanian side. If we're talking about this from the perspective of American foreign policy, I think that we want the United States as the patron of Jordan to do better: to potentially attach economic aid to attaining meaningful democratic targets—which is not controversial, because it's been done before for many other countries; to bring up human rights issues or corruption issues higher up on the meeting agenda rather than leaving it on the margins after all the heavy lifting is done on geopolitics or strategic collaborations. But that doesn't happen.

And it's for that reason why I think that there is a good degree of complicity taking place within the U.S.-Jordanian relationship. It doesn't have to be this way. I think things can change. But there has to be some groundswell of pressure—not just from below, but within these institutions in Washington—for there to be a mutual recognition that effectuating reforms will create some short-term pain. But the goal is shared: it's to make Jordan a prosperous, stable place where everyone can be happy both supporting or living within. And that's not necessarily the case now.

Arwa Shobaki [39:13]

Great, thank you. Curtis, I don't know if you want to build on that a little bit. What message should President Biden be giving to the king on Monday? As Sean mentioned, the U.S. has a lot of tools and a lot of leverage, and the king is here to reset [the] relationship with the U.S. administration after a difficult four years under [former president] Trump. What do you think Biden should be communicating to the king?

Curtis Ryan [39:43]

Yeah, that's a really interesting question, isn't it? Because I think there are a lot of things that, as Sean said, usually aren't that high up the ladder in terms of getting into the weeds of the details, but I think it would be helpful if some of them were in the Oval Office meeting, if they actually didn't speak just in generalities and so on. Because we can be sure they're going to be talking about the level of security and military and defense and intelligence cooperation and all these types of things about which there's domestic controversy within Jordan, but [the] Jordanian and U.S. state[s] are basically largely on the same page.

But as you said, this is also an important opportunity moment because the previous four years, especially from the Jordanian perspective, were really rough. Jordan is not used to being sidelined and peripheralized and marginalized like it was during the Trump years and really taken for granted, at best. Even though the aid numbers were going up and the military cooperation kept going up, there was still this perception of lost political influence. So here's a moment. And I think there too, the emphasis should be really on supporting real rather than just cosmetic reform, not just because the U.S. is interested in that, but for Jordan, for its own sake entirely.

As Sean said, Jordanians are so used to this. Rounds of reform have been going on for so long that there's always the danger of just completely eliminating that word [from] having any real meaning anymore. Going back to the national charter with the 1989 to 1991 period of reform, and, as Sean was mentioning, we had the mid-2000s National Agenda, there are some really good ideas in some of these packages that just weren't then implemented, and that was now 15 years ago.

“Rounds of reform have been going on for so long that there's always the danger of just completely eliminating that word [from] having any real meaning anymore.”

Then, the National Dialogue Committee and the whole series of reforms there. And the King's own discussion papers which promised an extensive number of reforms, including parliamentary governments. So part of that could be the beginning of the talking point, which is that there are these discussion papers that lay out a set of ideas. There are multiple different reform packages, and a new one on the way, with a different, somewhat broad set of elites, some of whom don't really care that much about reform—but many of whom actually do and are trying to figure out, is this time real? Is this time going to really mean something?

But I think everyday, normal Jordanian people can be forgiven if they're thinking: I've seen this movie before. I saw one, two, three, and I'm not sure four is going to be any better, etc. So I think there has to be a deliverable this time. I hate to use a corporate term, but there has to be something that shows up that is much more meaningful. So it is not just the cycle of crisis which leads to [a] reshuffled cabinet which leads to ousting the government which leads to new laws on elections and parties, and then eventually, every once in a while, [to] a kind of blue ribbon commission on reform. It has to be beyond that.

There's a lot of discussion, and my point is that there has been some really good discussion, [about reform]. There have been some really good ideas, and it has been common for people to say, that'd be a great idea if we actually did it. So that would be the push mark—let's actually do it. Encourage it. You'll have international backing; your ally or your patron will back this up if you actually go that direction. But if it's going to be about parliament, then parliament itself should be a more powerful institution. Most Jordanians don't belong to a party [and] have sort of a bad taste about the whole idea of parties and are very uncertain about them—and certainly about their effectiveness.

So, if those are going to be on the table, then it has to be much more serious about making parties more meaningful and supported with no intelligence service interference in them or in individuals who seek to create one or join one. Make parliament more powerful and a more representative institution but one that can actually check and balance other institutions of the State.

And keep in mind that those youth data are something I think would really resonate—actually with somebody like Biden. The unemployment rate and things like that would be something that would stick in his head. And I think that would be a good idea to emphasize that that's got to be in there too. I think it would be entirely in character in that meeting to then discuss things like the Teachers' Union and getting it back to life, because it was supposedly one of the great achievements of the Arab Spring period. And now it's been dissolved and its leadership arrested, and so on, and even protests keep getting broken up, etc.

Why not get that—why not reverse that and get it back off the ground and stop letting security institutions interfere with it, for example, and allow people—the last thing I would say is the freedom of speech part. Because all those are about institutions, and then organizations like parties and professional associations and civil society, and then down to the individual freedom of speech issues, freedom of organization. Jordan is such a techy society. It was so far ahead of

every other country in the entire Arab world on the internet and everything with the word “cyber” in front of it and being wide open until new laws were introduced in 2010, 2011, and 2012, that started curbing all this for various and sundry reasons. But it was once the most open area on the internet in the entire Arab world. And now I think it is fair to say a lot of people worry about what they post on Facebook, and everybody is on Facebook in Jordan. Maybe not in the United States, but in Jordan, everybody has WhatsApp groups, everybody has multiple WhatsApp chats going on. Many people are now on Clubhouse.

But also many people complain about interference across the board in those and being worried about what they said, posted, wrote, etc. And I think it's important to bear in mind that most—every Jordanian I know who complains about that thinks it's fundamentally not Jordanian to approach that. So bring that back, actually. There's just a lot of potential there that could actually be on there that Jordanians have come up with themselves. It shouldn't be anything foreign-imposed. But actively encouraging what Jordanians actually already came up with and had been asking for many, many, many years, I think could have real positive effects.

Arwa Shobaki [46:19]

Thank you. Bessma, I don't know if you'd like to add some thoughts to that. I don't know what the view is like from Canada. And in terms of Canadian engagement, broader engagement, what more can the Western powers do to encourage these types of things that Sean and Curtis are talking about?

Bessma Momani [46:39]

Yeah, thank you. So let me start off with the caveat that I'm not really comfortable with the Americans being seen as somehow the moral authority on democracy right now, or at all, to be honest with you. I think, with all due respect, again, as a Canadian, I can tell you that we're not comfortable with that. So we have to be a little modest. Let's be honest. And let me say something else, I think Jordanians are generally very critical of people's intentions and foreign policy intentions. And I hate to say this, but if you had a poll out there and asked the average Jordanian: Is it in the U.S. interest to have Jordanian democracy? They'd say no. So I mean, let's be very frank, here, again, [the U.S.] is not seen as the moral authority on democracy. So whatever comes out of the U.S., if anybody's listening from the State Department, I'm really sorry, but you're not dealing with an audience that sees these policies in an uncritical light. But let's move on.

“If you had a poll and asked the average Jordanian: Is it in the U.S. interest to have Jordanian democracy? They'd say no. So I mean, let's be very frank, here, again, [the U.S.] is not seen as the moral authority on democracy.”

It was a beautiful description of this musical chairs of reform. You can see how the word reform—Jordanians are jaded—they just don't believe it's real. It's a delay tactic: give it a decade, how many more committees can you bring, okay, this tribe complains, bring one person in from this tribe. Jordanians are really good at keeping this

great aura of modernization and democratization without really moving the needle. So it is frustrating.

And to the point of the Teachers' Syndicate, I have a lot of family who are teachers in the public system, and they're paid peanuts in a public system with dilapidated infrastructure, classrooms where there's no heat. These guys are not the ones you want to be imprisoning and breaking up. These are the people who are teaching your kids the fundamentals. Now, I know the public system isn't great with education, and most people, if you can afford it, are going to a private system. But that's not an excuse to sideline it. It's actually an indication of investment. So we should do more to support the teachers. And if you're going to talk the talk and walk the walk, you're going to have to do something about that and get these kinds of unions and syndicates back up and running and really be sincere about having them play an active role in society.

On things that can be done from U.S. and Western aid agencies and bilateral aid, I would focus on anything that's jobs. Jobs, jobs, jobs. I mean, really, truly, and utterly. Everything else has been tried and been given. There's no need to give them more advice on exchange rates, more advice on this...they need jobs. So if you really want to help, if the Americans really want to help—American companies, a lot of them are very much in the tech space, back to Curtis's point. There's young people. You couldn't get a more hyperconnected society. Relatively speaking, they speak English really well. This is what I would love to see: American companies taking a true interest and benefiting from the demographic dividend that the country has of young, educated, hyperconnected, relatively pro-Western—you can do more, I think in that space. And that is not just incumbent on the American government. That would require some sort of trilateral relationship with the private sector.

Lastly, women in jobs. Sixteen percent of women are in the labor market, and this is not all due to a lack of wanting a job. Women give up. They're highly educated, and it's a loss. It's an absolute loss to a society to have only 16 percent of its women [in] labor market participation. So a lot more can be done there, more investment in trades. Education-wise, there's way too many doctors, way too many engineers. We need trades, and we need to start doing more about highlighting the great value of trades. And that's certainly something that the college system in the U.S.—community colleges—can be more active in. So I think there's lots to do.

“Sixteen percent of women are in the labor market, and this is not all due to a lack of wanting a job. Women give up. They're highly educated, and it's a loss. It's an absolute loss to a society to have only 16 percent of its women [in] labor market participation.”

Personally, I don't think I want to see more [of a] heavy hand from the Americans, lecturing the Jordanians on democracy. [If] they want to make democracy flourish, they need to help with the context of the country [that] is suffering financially, and people have lost hope. Poor people aren't your worry. If we're talking about the street, it's not that. It's the discrepancy between the rich and poor that makes people frustrated. And this country does not lack wealth. That is what is really making the country so difficult politically, is that people look around, and they know

someone is winning, someone is gaining from this system, but it's not the average person—despite your education, despite your so-called doing all the right things and getting the education. So there's a lot more that can be done on the development side. I'd rather see that be the emphasis of Biden. It's not to shortchange the great proposals being said about actually making these reforms, not just—I love the idea of deliverables, that'd be great—it can be done as a part of this as well. But I do hope there's more in the investment space because I think that's where the Jordanians will benefit most.

Arwa Shobaki [51:51]

Excellent. Thank you so much. Super insightful. We've got about seven minutes and a lot of questions, so maybe we could do kind of like a speed round. I'll try and get through maybe three or four questions and just ask for brief responses from you.

The first one is interesting: What in your view is the main reason why repression in Jordan in recent years has gotten worse? Why does the king feel the need to rule in an increasingly intolerant and exclusionary manner? I don't know if you guys have any thoughts on that. Who wants to tackle that?

Bessma Momani [52:35]

I think the repression in the entire region has gone up, and so the Jordanians just feel like—rather, the Jordanian government feels like—there's more greenlighting of that. Everywhere you turn around, the story is not good, whether it's journalists being arrested, digital authoritarianism in the region is on the rise, certainly, again, self-censorship. It's endemic now in the region. Maybe it is the Arab Winter, post-Arab Spring. But I think this overall regional climate of added repression has given the Jordanian government some view that it's not going to be opposed in the same way as it was before.

Arwa Shobaki [53:18]

Thank you, Bessma. There's a question here about the security services, which we haven't talked about, but their role has been alluded to several times in different responses. This question is: Given the role of the security services in closing the door to genuine reform, what about security sector reform? Is that something that can be taken seriously in Jordan? Can it be thought of as a key precondition to genuine political and economic reform? And what are the challenges to that? I don't know if Curtis Ryan, Sean...?

Curtis Ryan [53:56]

I have just a couple thoughts. I mean, I think that would be a good idea. But I want to support Bessma's point earlier that it's really hard for the United States to point a finger at anybody on democracy issues, given the issues that this country has been through in the last couple of years, and almost losing its democracy entirely just a few months [ago]. I'm old enough to remember January when we almost lost our democracy, right? So we can't really point too much, but I do think that has also come—there's been pressure also from within, in Jordan, and including, the king wrote a letter just recently actually to the GID [General Intelligence Department], basically suggesting—I'm paraphrasing here—to focus on external security

matters, counterterrorism, things like that, not on domestic politics. So, as is often the case—it kind of feels like it's the echo part of our discussion here—it's the question of the follow-through. Is that real? Or was that it? Is there going to be more reform to it? Because over the years, there has been some attempt, at least the mildest levels, to reform, change the leadership, and encourage reform. But of course, it's an intelligence organization, so, much like its American counterparts, it's incredibly secretive by definition, and we don't know a lot of what's going on. I can think of other institutions, including in this country, that could use this kind of reform. And I wouldn't be able to tell you if it's happening because they're by definition secretive organizations.

Arwa Shobaki [55:30]

Does anyone else have anything to add on that?

Sean Yom [55:35]

Yeah, Arwa, I would just emphasize that I know that in the past when USAID, as part of its broad portfolio of aid programming devoted to governance and democracy in Jordan, whenever they've tried to approach the issue of security sector reform, well-meaning people on the ground were frequently rebuffed. Because security sector reform in Jordan is not just a matter of bureaucratically streamlining budgets and redefining issue domains for competing policing and intelligence units. It really does mean wading into the royal kitchen and having to touch very sensitive political issues about the scope of power for institutions that some—not all, but some—in the Jordanian state see as the last guardian for preserving Jordan, which is not the discussion you want to have. You're just a middle manager promoting aid or implementing aid programs on the ground. So, I agree with Curt. I think it's important to talk about security sector reform, but if there's going to be a vector for that, it's not going to come from Washington, for all the reasons that Bessma also mentioned. Why would it come from Washington when the security sector in Jordan is the recipient of enormous amounts of American technology, skills, aid support, and training over the years as well? So there's no reason to reform it if American officials still need it so Jordan can serve a particular role in American grand strategy.

“Security sector reform in Jordan is not just a matter of bureaucratically streamlining budgets and redefining issue domains for competing policing and intelligence units. It really does mean wading into the royal kitchen and having to touch very sensitive political issues about the scope of power.”

Arwa Shobaki [57:13]

Thank you. Let's try and squeeze in one more. There's a question here about the king's constant and repeated dissolution of parliament, removal of prime ministers. Why? And how does this impact the public perception of government? I don't know who wants to take that.

Bessma Momani [57:40]

So I might not have an academic answer. I'm surprised not every Jordanian has by now served in some capacity as a minister. It just feels like this musical chairs show. Look, I mean, I don't

know why. I think that it's a shame because people are losing faith. It's back to being jaded. I think the average Jordanian is pretty jaded with the entire political process, including parliament. And that's not healthy. You don't want people to feel jaded, like it's all just a show. And that's, I think, honestly, the biggest sentiment—that the parliament is ineffective. It really is just a way to give political elites a lifetime pension once they leave. It's like a welfare system for the elite. That's what it feels like on the ground. And again, that's a terrible sentiment to have amongst your population because if you lose faith in it, you're not going to vote. You're not going to participate. Civic engagement goes down. This is all—for political scientists, the three of us that we are—that's just terrible for the social contract, people's faith in the entire country and process. And it does [affect people's trust in the state], meaning, we do have apathy. People don't really feel like voting matters. And the reform process feels like another—sorry, I'm going to use the inshallah-type sentiment like, “yeah, down the road, inshallah, we'll do it.” It feels like that. And that really is, I think, a very sad testament to Jordanian politics.

Arwa Shobaki [59:21]

Thank you. It looks like we are out of time. This has been an excellent conversation. I'm so glad that we had it today. Thank you. Thank you so much for your expertise and your devotion to Jordan and to studying Jordan. And for those of you who have joined us midway through the event, I need to just plug our event. You can rewatch it, and you can rewatch the video on our website. It should be up pretty soon at pomed.org. And thank you out in the audience for listening to our discussion today. Thanks very much. Have a good afternoon. Bye.